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SUBJECT: ISLAMIC GROUP MEMBERS ARE BIG MEN ON CAMPUS AT LEADING BANGLADESHI UNIVERSITY

Classified By: CDA a.i. Geeta Pasi. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The leading Islamic student group in Bangladesh is a very big deal at Rajshahi University, one of the country's top schools. Local journalists and secular-oriented university students alike speak with near awe of the power wielded on campus by Islami Chhatra Shibir, saying its vast influence extends beyond the student body to who is offered faculty jobs. Shibir leaders put up a modest front, playing down not only their influence but their universally acknowledged ties to Jamaat-e-Islami, the country's biggest Islamic political party. They insist their goal of increasing the role of Islam in national life must be achieved democratically and without violence. Although these claims are met by skepticism by others, the USG should consider reaching out to Shibir leaders as there is little doubt they will remain influential well beyond their university years. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Islami Chhatra Shibir (Shibir) is a nationwide student group associated with Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat), the Islamic political party that was a junior partner in the 2001-2006 coalition government led by the much larger Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Shibir is disdained by student groups aligned with secular-oriented parties, which has prevented it from organizing above ground at Dhaka University, the nation's most prestigious school. It is openly active on many other campuses, and an Embassy team took advantage of a government vulnerability assessment trip to Rajshahi in mid-February to speak with Shibir leaders at the main local university.

¶3. (C) Meet Delawer Hosen, president of the Rajshahi University chapter of Shibir. Wearing a red-and-white striped button-down shirt with cufflinks and a sporty brown jacket, his hair fashionably blown back and a Yaser Arafat-style stubble on his otherwise fresh face, Hosen was eager to portray his group in the manner in which he dressed -- sensibly moderate. Shibir, he said, seeks a larger role for Islam in national life via democratic and non-violent means. He decried the Islamic extremist group that not long ago terrorized the area around Rajshahi, Jamaatul Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB), as "totally destructive." Mohammad Mijanur Rahman, the Jane Austen-reading education secretary of Shibir at Rajshahi, immediately added in flawless English: "We also don't support the destructive programs of al Qaida and the Taliban." When anti-government riots broke out on campus in August, the Shibir leaders said they immediately ordered members not to join to ensure the group's image was not sullied by participating in violence. The Shibir leaders also insisted their group was completely independent of

Jamaat -- a claim made incredulous not least by the fact that Jamaat members put the Embassy team in touch with them.

¶4. (C) Shibir does not have quite the moderate, violence-averse reputation its Rajshahi leaders suggest. Earlier this year Shibir members fought the student wing of the Awami League political party at a Dhaka-area university. Rezaul Karim Raju (protect), a Rajshahi-based reporter who is the assistant secretary general of the Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists, said local Shibir members at times resort to violence as well. He also said Shibir, which claims up to 700 members out of a student body of about 25,000 at Rajshahi University, is so influential on campus it can ensure that a strong legion of like-minded people are hired onto the faculty. Jamaat leaders in Rajshahi confirmed their supporters dominate the governing board of the school. After insisting that Shibir held no influence over the university, Hosen conceded that he personally spoke with the school's top official about personnel matters.

¶5. (SBU) The Shibir leaders further described their group as highly organized and intently focused on spreading and deepening the influence of Islam. Their main tasks, they said, were teaching fellow students the Koran and the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad known as "hadiths." Other Shibir activities at Rajshahi University include running a library with a selection of Islamic literature; collecting donations; providing assistance to select impoverished and "meritorious" students; and offering English seminars. Hosen went on to say that the national education system did not provide students a sufficient grounding in morality, ethics and good citizenship, but it was unclear what changes Shibir members seek. He and his colleagues were consistently vague when they were asked to explain their vision of a more

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Islamic society -- at one point they mentioned the abolition of interest charges but refused to venture much further, careful again, it seemed, to not say anything they believed might offend Americans.

¶6. (C) Comment: Most Shibir members go on to join Jamaat; indeed, all four leaders said supporting an Islamic-based party or otherwise promoting the spread of Islam were foremost among their life goals after graduation. Although Jamaat is the country's largest Islamic political party and Shibir its main feeder organization, Embassy Dhaka contact with Shibir is limited since they are not overtly active in Dhaka. Although they were far less forthcoming than one would hope, the Rajshahi Shibir members appeared to enjoy their engagement with the Embassy team. Post recognizes a need to better reach out to this group, many of whom will be in positions to influence Bangladesh's more Islamic-minded people, and will work on strategies to do so.
Pasi